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History of the Records Review Branch

The Records Review Branch was created to administer the Agency's program for the systematic review of its classified records. The Branch, and the program, did not spring into being fully grown, like Athena from the head of Zeus, but, like the great pyramid of Cheops, was built a stone at a time as a result of considerable effort. Also like the great pyramid, the creation of both was inspired from above. Whether they endure equally well must await the passage of time.

Executive Order 11652 of 10 March 1972 automatically declassified all national security classified documents over 30 years old unless they were specifically certified as requiring continued protection by the head of the originating agency or its successor. The Archivist of the United States was given the responsibility for the systematic review of such records and all agencies of the Executive Branch were directed to develop procedures for taking appropriate action on records over which they exercised original or final jurisdiction. The basic requirement of the review was (and remains) the identification of those documents containing information still deemed sensitive enough to warrant continued protection. Under the Order there were only two criteria for such protection: national security sensitivity and the threat of immediate jeopardy to an individual. The unique aspect of the ordered review was the systematic approach which it required. Unlike an FOIA review, which is essentially an examination of an assortment of documents randomly gathered from a variety of files in response to an individual request, a systematic review examines documents as parts of complete, organic file units (i.e., records maintained in a predetermined physical arrangement in accordance with an overall plan of organization) with logical points of beginning and end. In a systematic review, decisions are based not upon ad hoc judgments but upon the provisions of officially promulgated review guidelines issued by the originator of the classified material or functional successor.

Because of its responsibilities in the area of federal records programs its enormous holdings of classified documents, the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) served as the focal point for organizing implementation of EO 11652 among the agencies of the Executive Branch in 1972. The Archivist of the United States, Dr. James B. Rhoads, on 11 April 1972, formally requested the then-DCI, Richard Helms, to send a representative to the initial planning meeting to be held at the National Archives on 28 April. John Coffey, the then-Deputy Director for Support was so designated and he duly attended this initial meeting. On 20 June, Executive Director-

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Comptroller William Colby informed the Archivist that [redacted] had been designated chief focal point officer for dealing with NARS on declassification matters. After this hopeful beginning, only slight progress was made on developing a broad Agency-wide program. Proposals for an internal program had been discussed as early as 1971-1972 and on 3 August 1973 a proposal for a declassification unit of 15 was presented by Deputy Director ^{NASRO} Brownman. DCI Colby's comment was: "Ye Gods. Let's keep it a coordinating office and count on part-time consultation from the DD's when needed." The major effort in the Agency in these years was instituted by the DDO, which established a team of annuitants eventually totalling 15 in 1972 to review OSS records still in Agency custody. Three members of this team were seconded to NARS after May 1973 to review the approximately 900 cubic feet of OSS Research and Analysis Branch records held there. These three were later supplemented by two prerepresentatives of IPS-- [redacted] and [redacted] who reviewed randomly identified OSS material located throughout NARS holdings.

Only as the Agency's thirtieth anniversary approached did the problem of systematic review become one of increased moment. Further avoidance of the issue was precluded by Executive Order 11905 of 19 February 1976 which stated that the DCI "Shall...establish a vigorous program to downgrade and declassify foreign intelligence information as appropriate and consistent with Executive Order 11652." Politically, the Agency was required to move as far as possible in the direction of "openness" as was consistent with individual rights and the legitimate needs of national security. The DDO ordered the establishment of a "Classification Review Branch" in August 1976 within ISS ^{OFFICER} to review its own records holdings and designated a senior intelligence [redacted] as chief. Impetus for an Agency-wide program, however, came from the DDA. A proposed plan of organization was prepared in the AI's office in the latter part of the year and widely discussed. On 1 November 1976, the AC/ISAS, [redacted], submitted a paper requesting authority to begin developing an Agency-wide review program to the AI and DDA. Both approved on 2 November and 4 November respectively. Before his replacement as C/ISAS in the following month, [redacted] brought in [redacted] a veteran administrative support officer, to supervise the program and recruited from NARS David F. Rudgers, an archivist with four years experience in the declassification program of that Agency. Both were attached to RAB/ISAS but reported to C/ISAS directly.

The establishment of a systematic records review program was a new departure of the CIA. Unlike nearly all other government agencies, in which any foreign intelligence operations are only a modest portion of broader official responsibilities, the CIA mission is devoted entirely

to the craft of intelligence. Information relating to intelligence sources and methodology has always required particularly careful handling and the DCI is specifically charged by law with protecting such information. Because it is politically impossible to exempt the Agency from the systematic review requirements of EO 11652, the new program had to meet the letter and spirit of the legal requirements, adhere to proper NARS records regulations, and safeguard such important intelligence interests as the identity of sources, technical intelligence collecting systems, the financing of intelligence efforts, foreign liaison arrangements, compartmented material, and the overall plans and capabilities of the American foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence effort.

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As in any new program, many initiatives had to be taken simultaneously. The basic question requiring resolution was whether the program would be organized on a "centralized" basis with a unit drawn from all components or on a "decentralized" basis with each component having its own review staff under general oversight from ISAS. The DDI and DDS&T favored the former and the DDO and (initially) the DDA favored the latter. The first general meeting on the program, held on 18 January, and a smaller follow-up gathering on 21 January witnessed highly animated discussion on the subject between DDI and DDO representatives. ODCI representatives had opted for the centralized approach on 25 January and the DDA also chose this method on 16 February, but the issue was not finally resolved until the Executive Advisory Group meeting of 1 March. A detailed briefing on the two alternatives was given by the Chief, ISAS and after brief discussion, the EAG unanimously adopted the centralized approach. The DDO, William Wells, was particularly explicit in his approval of the centralized system. The upshot of the EAG meeting was the Action Plan, prepared in ISAS, submitted on 4 April, and approved by DDCI E.H. Knoche on 2 May. The Action Plan established the Records Review Branch (RRB), with a projected strength [redacted] STATINTL including 30 reviewers from the directorates and the ODCI. It also called for the designation of senior focal point officers from each directorate, the initiation of surveys to determine the nature and time period of files in the Archives and Records Center, and the establishment of liaison with other federal agencies. The Action Plan explicitly gave RRB responsibility for final review decisions on documents and information originated by or clearly attributable to the CIA and its predecessors and on information over which the CIA has exclusive or final authority. Although the review mission was originally viewed in terms of 30 years, RRB learned unofficially in March 1977 that a new Executive Order would drop the time period to 20 years and organized its efforts accordingly. STATINTL

The appointment of senior focal point officers followed:

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a considerable delay [] an experienced administrative support officer assigned to RRB was named DDA focal point officer on 17 November. These officers were "to aid and assist. . . in promptly solving unique problems" arising from the review.

Important in the conduct of a systematic review program was the preparation of written guidelines spelling out those categories of information requiring continued protection. These would be used by reviewers to identify such material and thus had to be explicit and comprehensive. Each directorate approached the preparation problem in a slightly different fashion. In the DDA, each component was called upon to designate a focal point officer. These officers were briefed on the review program and the requirements for guidelines on 18 April. They then prepared papers describing what categories of information their offices felt should be protected. These were incorporated into a comprehensive guideline which, after extensive revision and coordination, was approved by the ADDA, Michael J. Malanick, on 1 December. In DDI, an orientation meeting was held on 24 June, chaired by [] and was attended by component focal point officers. However, because of the functional similarity of DDI components, a draft guideline was prepared by [] and coordinated with those components. When this was completed a finalized draft was presented to the DDI, Dr. Sayre Stevens, for signature. Dr. Stevens approved on 26 September. In the DDO, drafting of guidelines became the unique responsibility of Mr. Murray of ISS, in close coordination with RRB. A finalized draft was submitted to Deputy Director Wells on 2 December by [] the C/ISS and approved on 16 December. Preparing DDS&T guidelines was particularly difficult, primarily because of the highly technical responsibilities of the directorate and the autonomous nature of such components as [] and NPIC. Therefore, preparing a unitary guideline was not considered practical. A briefing session of directorate focal point officers was held on 8 July and individual component guidelines were received by RRB in the following months but no finalized package approved by Deputy Director Dirks has yet appeared.

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In initiating the program, it soon became necessary to determine the nature and quantity of the records requiring review. Not only had this not been done in any systematic fashion, one directorate official claimed most 30-year old material of that directorate had been purged years earlier and the statement could not be disputed. In February, Mr. Rudgers made a preliminary examination of the records in the AARC based on the then-existing finding aids. Although some provisional determinations on quantity and time frame were made, the documentation on record holdings was scattered and incomplete, so no clear evaluation was possible. Therefore, in March, Mr. Rudgers was authorized to undertake a systematic survey of the permanent Archives holdings containing material over 20 years of age. The survey involved the services of three Archives personnel and was completed in June 1977. Approximately eleven thousand cubic feet of records (50% of Archives holdings) was examined on a systematic basis and the nature of

entire file series was described. This survey was used for planning and organizing review work and indicated the real scope of Agency record holdings for the first time. It also served as the forerunner of an extensive project initiated by order of John Blake, as ADDCI in August 1977, to screen files designated as permanent under records control schedules, remove temporary material, and prepare automated shelf lists.

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[redacted] as Acting Branch Chief, was active during this formative period in bringing the branch to life as an administrative entity. Despite considerable difficulty, temporary office space was obtained in June in 6C-25 and larger, more permanent quarters were occupied in GG-14 on 29 November. Many individuals sounded out [redacted] concerning a position with RRB and the first regular reviewer, [redacted] from the NFAC Operations Center, reported on 3 October. An important requirement for any branch was satisfied when [redacted] became the RRB secretary on 22 August. Another important need was fulfilled when RRB obtained a 30-cup coffee pot in late October. Other reviewers began to report and the first regular review projects, on ORE and OCR records, were begun in November 1977. A ceremony for marking the first declassification of an Agency document by the ADDA was held on 18 November. To establish intellectual control over documents reviewed, approval to establish a computerized data retrieval system was received from the ODDA on 17 June and [redacted] an ODP systems analyst, was assigned to ISAS to create such a system on 18 July. While all this was under way, [redacted] served as a major CIA spokesman on the inter-agency task force assigned to rewrite Executive Order 11652. In this capacity he actively represented Agency interests against those spokespersons from other government agencies who lacked knowledge of intelligence methodology and thus put forward proposals harmful to the Agency. Another important administrative task was completed in the late summer of 1977 when a draft regulation modifying [redacted] by formally establishing RRB was submitted to RCB/ISAS for coordination. (Final approval of this regulation is pending.)

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Since the Action Plan authorized RRB to establish liaison with other government agencies, this responsibility was assigned to [redacted] detailed for that purpose from AARC on 17 May. The liaison contacts (by visit, correspondence, and telephone) involved locating Agency records held by other Executive Branch components and discussions for the possible exchange of guidelines. Important contacts were made with the State and Defense Departments, NSA, and the FBI in particular. As these contacts developed, it became clear that none of the agencies contacted had developed any sort of program for meeting the requirements to be set forth in the upcoming executive order. The State Department, in particular, came to the CIA for advise and several of its high officials received a briefing from the C/ISAS and AC/RRB on the Agency's program on 14 December.

One of the most important liaison relationships developed was with the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) and most particularly

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with the staff of its Records Declassification Division (NND) headed by Mr. Edwin A. Thompson. There were several important reasons for this. NARS is the agency which sets all records policies throughout the executive branch. In addition, NARS is the sole legal repository for permanently valuable noncurrent federal records and the end result of Agency review efforts is inevitably, unclassified offerings to NARS. Also, thousands of documents originated by the Agency or containing Agency-derived information had been located by NND reviewers in their examination of files retired by other federal agencies. Finally, the Archivist of the United States has been given broad responsibilities in the area of records declassification by current and forthcoming executive orders. Therefore, it was good policy to adapt Agency procedures to standard archival practices and become one of the first federal establishments to do so. This relationship was initiated with a meeting by [] and Mr. Rudgers with Dr. James E. O'Neill, Deputy Archivist of the United States on 19 May. Because Mr. Thompson was the focal point officer for federal declassification programs and a key adviser to the Archivist on this subject, he was kept closely informed. He received a visit to the AARC in March 1977 and he and his senior staff were given a briefing on the development of the Agency program. Mr. [] coordinated his ADP system planning with the NARS computerized document retrieval system. New RRB staff members were given tours of NND facilities at the National Archives building and the Washington National Records Center. Finally, in January 1978, arrangements were made to assign three RRB reviewers to the NND branch at the records center to examine Agency material located there. The one early positive accomplishment of this liaison was the forwarding to NARS of the first Agency declassification guideline [] on 23 August. STATSPEC

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All problems in the development of the Agency's review program have not been solved but all are being attacked. As more records are processed by component RMO's, an increasing volume of review actions are being taken and procedures are becoming formalized. Eventually files of declassified records will become available for transfer to NARS and the CIA will have lived up to the intent of EO 11652.

Written by []
while RRB (predecessor
of CRR) was in GG 14.